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READER-RESPONSE CRITICISM AND ITS
IMPLICATIONS FOR THE TEACHING OF WRITING

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State
College, San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English Composition


by
Linda Leigh Sherman
January 1982

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ABSTRACT

It has been assumed for many years that writing and reading have some useful connection. Reading materials are assigned in Freshman Composition classes; the students are asked to read particular essays, and then . . . what? Either they are instructed to imitate the style of the polished professional writer, find the particular literary devices and forms he or she has used so competently and apply these devices to his or her own writing; or it is hoped that the student will "naturally" assimilate some of the style of those they read. In this essay I propose that reading can most certainly improve an author's writing, but not through the traditional methods previously cited; instead students should be taught to analyze the literature according to reader-response criticism. Reader-response criticism and the new composition theories lead the reader-writer through the entire process of written communication. The student is forced to see writing from the audience's point of view as well as the author's. I propose that combining reader-response critical techniques and a process, student-centered composition instruction technique will provide students with a more complete view of the writing process thereby enhancing their essays.

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INTRODUCTION

English departments, at all levels of education, have always had, not only the responsibility of teaching students to read, interpret, and analyze literature, but also that of instructing them in the skill of writing. English teachers are usually graduates of programs in literature and are very rarely trained specifically to teach composition. They are expected to transfer their knowledge of language as an art to language as a skill and to employ this expertise in the field of composition. In transforming their critical skills, the instructors use the literary conventions learned in literature courses to convey the skill of writing to the students. Therefore it does not seem surprising that the development of literary criticism and that of composition instruction mirror each other.¹

One can see this mirroring effect of criticism and composition instruction in both "New Criticism" and reader-response. When New Criticism was the major mode of studying literature, teachers of writing emphasized form, grammar, the five-paragraph essay, and other structure-oriented techniques, as will be later seen through the models proposed by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren. Teaching methods primarily consisted of reading works which

¹Steven Mailloux, "Literary Criticism and Composition Theory," College Composition and Communication, v. 29 (1978) 267.

exemplified the writing models the students were requested to imitate; lecturing on sentence structure, proper paragraphing (topic sentence, etc.), vocabulary, and basic grammar; and grading student writing with particular emphasis on error.

Anomalies, however, have been discovered in both the "New Criticism" and the mode of writing instruction based on it. According to Thomas Kuhn, when anomalies are perceived in a currently accepted paradigm, a new paradigm is constructed which will change the anomalies of the old paradigm into norms.² This chain of reactions has resulted in reader-response criticism and a new set of writing theories which reflect similar goals and principles.

Reader-response criticism and the new theories on composition instruction share many basic premises. Both are process-oriented, student-centered, experience-focused, relatively unstructured theories. Both schools of thought also see reading and writing as similar, if not identical processes. It is interesting to note that when reader-response critics talk about writing, they often use the same terms as the writing theorists. Robert Crossman (a reader-response critic who will be discussed in detail later), for example, says that,

²Thomas Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

as a writer I begin with a jumble of purposes, ideas, and words that can only be examined by the activity of putting them on paper and reading them off. The physical acts of pushing my pencil over the paper, and of casting my eye over the markings just made, may be called by different names, but in practice they are inseparable... The very act of writing includes reading.³

Crossman's description of his experience with writing is remarkably similar to what Donald M. Murray, one of the new writing theorists, says about it.

The writer is constantly learning from the writing what it intends to say. The writer listens for evolving meaning. To learn what to do next, the writer doesn't look primarily outside the piece of writing--to rule books, rhetorical traditions, models, to previous writing experiences, to teachers or editors. To learn what to do next, the writer looks within the piece of writing. The writing itself helps the writer see the subject. Writing can be a lens: if the writer looks through it, he or she will see what will make the writing more effective.⁴

Both emphasize the process of discovery which necessarily offers itself during composing, as opposed to thinking of the writing as simply the means to an end product. The activity of writing is what produces meaning in the work, just as in reader-response criticism it is the experience

³Robert Crossman, "Do Readers Make Meaning," in The Reader In the Text, ed. Susan Suleiman and Inge Crosman, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 163.

⁴Donald M. Murray, "Writing as Process: How Writing Finds Its Own Meaning," in Eight Approaches to Teaching Composition, ed. Timothy R. Donavan and Ben W. McClelland, (Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 1980) p. 7.

of the reading itself which creates meaning. Both activities are the results of the same process.

Reader-response critics and the new writing theorists are also similar in their refusal to depend on authorities, either in the form of textbooks or instructors, to teach students. Meaning in reader-response criticism is found in the reader-student, and good writing, for people like Garrison, Moffett, and Murray, is, ultimately, only accomplished through the writer. Both center on the actual activity of the student instead of (supposed) objective analytical techniques. However, due to this intense focus on the student-reader-writer, these theorists are often criticized on the grounds that they lack standards. Stanley Fish and James Moffett answer these objections by asserting the social power of language. Both maintain that "one cannot escape the ultimately social implications inherent in any use of language."⁵ It is Fish's interpretive community, then, which limits the possibility of what students may produce in either criticism or writing.⁶ The

⁵James Moffett, Teaching the Universe of Discourse, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968) p. 191.

⁶Fish claims that the interpretive community is the force which prevents readers from applying any idiosyncratic meaning to the reading experience. Such force is a result of (a) the sharing of a language system which has a system of rules which all speakers of the language internalize, and (b) the literary communities emphasis on certain techniques and principles which the student is taught through which to read literature.

The standards of the interpretive community, whether in the composition classroom, the literary world, or any other communities within the world of language users, prevent the abuse of the language.

Thus, we see reader-response criticism and the new approaches to the teaching of writing reflecting the same objectives. In a description of what occurs in his literature courses, Stanley Fish states that, his

method, then, remains faithful to its principles; it has no point of termination; it is a process; it talks about experience and is an experience; its focus is effects and its result is an effect. In the end the only unqualified recommendation I can give is that it works.⁷

The principles Fish sees as important are the same as those propounded by Moffett, Garrison, and Murray. Although they approach the text from different sides, reader-response critics and these writing theorists emphasize many of the same points.

The mutual dedication of reader-response critics and the new writing theorists to many of the same principles is important for teachers of composition. Recently the use of "college readers" in the writing class has been strongly attacked. To write is the only way to learn to write,

⁷ Stanley Fish, "Literature in The Reader: Affective Stylistics," in Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism, ed. Jane P. Tompkins, (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1980) p. 99.

according to these new writing theorists. However, the close similarities between the reader-response method of approaching literature and the new methods of composition instruction indicate a need to review this premise. The new approaches to composition focus on the process of writing; reader-response criticism focuses on the process of reading. Creating (writing) and responding (reading, according to reader-response) are both necessary components of the writing process. How many times do composition instructors deliberate on the best method of getting their students to "READ" their work in order to observe the effect it will have on an audience? It is important for the writing student to realize that he or she is writing in order to communicate something to someone else. In the classroom situation, this "someone else" is the instructor (even if it is peer-readers, the instructor's values are what the peers will be taught to look for). Thus it is important for the student-reader-writer to learn to ask the same questions the teacher-reader asks, while reading a paper. If the instructor is reading according to principles established by reader-response critics, he or she will be concentrating on the rhetorical effectiveness of the piece instead of emphasizing the form or mechanics (although these items do influence the rhetorical effectiveness of the paper). Therefore, if writing students were to explore the response of an audience by approaching

literature through reader-response criticism (what the work under consideration does instead of what it means), they would be better able to understand the effect their own writing would have on others.⁸ It is my belief, then, that students in a writing course should be exposed to, and use reader-response critical methods to better comprehend the entire process of written communication.

⁸This is, of course, theory and not fact since I have not yet had the opportunity to test it out in the classroom.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF READER-RESPONSE CRITICISM

The stages of development which occur in all of the different facets of mankind's search for knowledge and truth also occur in the field of literary criticism. As historical, scientific, and political perspectives alter, so do critical perspectives in literature. Qualitative judgment on what makes good literature and, more importantly for this essay, who makes good literature, are constantly undergoing revisions by the literary community. Northrop Frye discusses this phenomenon in his book Creation and Recreation. Frye calls this process shifts in "the center of gravity."⁹ He suggests that the emphasis and search for meaning has changed from concentrating on the hero in literature to the concept of character, then to the author as creator of the text, then to the text as container of great meaning, and finally to the reader as recreator of meaning.¹⁰ I will deal specifically with the last two stages in Frye's account, showing how New Criticism (which saw the text as the source of meaning) changed to E. D.

⁹Northrop Frye, Creation and Recreation, (Toronto, Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1980) p. 64.

¹⁰By "recreator" Frye means that the reader of a work takes what he or she reads and instead of simply discovering the author's meaning inherent in the text, he or she recreates, from the experience of the text and in relation to his or her own imaginative skills, meaning. The word "reproducer" will be used in the same way as recreator.

Hirsch's adaptation of hermeneutic techniques, to Roland Barthes and the post-structuralists, and finally to the reader-response critics. New Criticism and reader-response criticism have mirror images in the field of composition instruction, and it is this relationship which shall be emphasized and shown to be relevant to current composition techniques.

The development of language, and thereby literary criticism, depends upon changes in many other fields including linguistics, and the social and the behavioral sciences. It has become an interdisciplinary activity which, according to Roland Barthes,

is not a peaceful operation: it begins effectively when the solidarity of the old disciplines breaks down--a process made more violent perhaps by the jolts of fashion--to the benefit of a new object and a new language, neither of which is in the domain of those branches of knowledge that one calmly sought to confront.¹¹

Barthes' description of the break-down of old classifications and their replacement by new ones closely parallels Thomas Kuhn's explanation of the development of the scientific paradigm in The Structure of Scientific

¹¹ Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text," in Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structualist Criticism, ed. Josue V. Harari, (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1979), p. 73. Even though "From Work to Text" was written in 1971, the methodology proposed in that article was established in 1968-69. See page 39, note 48 in Harari's book.

Revolutions.¹² Thus, one can see that both Frye and Barthes are discussing the development of the literary paradigm.

The first stage in Frye's scheme which will be dealt with here is that which cites the text as the container of great meaning. Criticism of this kind is known as New Criticism. New critics such as Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren see the text as an entity unto itself which the reader can approach to discover meanings inherent in the work. Each work has an action with a beginning, middle, and end; and each stage has a "significant and developing relation to one another."¹³ Meaning is discovered through the analysis of character, scene, point of view, style, and primarily, theme. Most importantly (because it is so opposed to what reader-response critics advocate), the New Critics analyze literature as a product. The primary question asked is "What does it mean?"¹⁴ and this question may only be asked after reading the entire work. The editors of An Approach to Literature describe "theme" as "something at the end of the story, something like the

¹²Thomas Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962) p. 2.

¹³Cleanth Brooks, John Thibaut Purser, and Robert Penn Warren, An Approach to Literature (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1975) p. 6.

¹⁴Brooks, et. al., p. 5.

piece of chewing gum that comes out when the penny is put into the machine."¹⁵ Not surprisingly, this view of reading as a product-oriented task ("Now you've read it, what does it mean?") is also seen in the New Critic's understanding of the professional writer's role. The writer is seen as being in complete control over his or her work. "A piece of fiction basically represents the writer's ideas and feelings about life and its meaning."¹⁶ New Critics do not consider the reader's response to the writing as important. They view the trained reader as a treasure hunter supplied with the tools of literary criticism who is supposed to dig in the correct places and come up with the "real" significance of the work. If the reader discovers a different meaning from what the author intended, either the author is a poor writer or, in an extreme version of New Criticism, the reader is simply wrong. The author is not seen as exploring ideas through the process of writing; rather he or she knows precisely what action he or she desires to convey prior to the physical act of writing, and writes it. Writing is the act of recording what already exists, either in the imagination or in actuality. This philosophy of writing as the means to an end product is carried over into the manner of

¹⁵Brooks, p. 17.

¹⁶Brooks, p. 5.

composition instruction prevalent at the time of the surge of New Criticism. These writing theories will be examined closely later.

This highly structured, dogmatic view of literature raises several problems. If, as commonly occurs, two trained critics find different meanings in the text, what does that mean? If the work contains actual meaning, independent of interpretation, why do readers respond differently? Critics who depend on the text as the source of meaning answered by setting up a hierarchical system of authority. Some people just know more than others.

E. D. Hirsch, a prominent literary critic with a background in the branch of hermeneutics which believes in "recoverable meaning," became an important influence on the creation of reader-response criticism because he gave the reader-response critics someone solid to react against. He maintains that literature and language hold specific meanings in accordance with the author's intentions. There is, therefore, only one valid interpretation in every work of art. For Hirsch, a "valid interpretation" is the interpretation most often agreed upon, which is based on "relevant evidence," and which attempts to discern authorial intention, "the only compelling normative principle that could lend validity to an interpretation."¹⁷

¹⁷E. D. Hirsch, Validity in Interpretation, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967) p. 5.

Hirsch adamantly denounces other approaches to literary criticism which lead to, what he considers, an anarchy of interpretations, thereby destroying the work. He deals with literature and language as concrete, pre-determined (by the author and the language used to convey his or her meaning), entities. It is this highly structured thinking that reader-response critics so strongly negate.

Hirsch's theories created the ideal situation for the development of a new paradigm. We recall Thomas Kuhn's observation that new paradigms are created when something occurs which does not fit into the mold of the old paradigm. The perception that something "went wrong" is the prelude to discovery. Reader-response critics object to Hirsch on precisely these grounds. Crossman feels that a "theory of poetic meaning that makes intimate knowledge of the poet's extratextual views so essential that only his personal friends during his lifetime, and biographical experts after his death"¹⁸ capable of knowing true meaning is objectionable. Hirsch helped to create the perfect atmosphere for the revolution of reader-response criticism.

Roland Barthes, an immediate predecessor of reader-response criticism, denounced the tunnel-vision of new criticism and placed more emphasis on the text as a product

¹⁸Crossman, p. 159.

of many disciplines (as may be seen in the passage previously quoted) and, in direct opposition to Hirsch, the reader as reproducer or recreator of the text. As opposed to the New Critics' view that the reader simply finds the meaning of the work and consumes this meaning, Barthes sees the reader as

playing the text as one plays a game, he searches for a practice that will reproduce the text; but to keep that practice from being reduced to a passive, inner mimesis (the text being precisely what resists such reduction), he also "plays" the text in the musical sense of the term.¹⁹

Barthes restores the Text to language. It, like language, is based on symbols; it is structured, but not centered.

Barthes opposes the dogmatic view of the New Critics who feel that the work is the only source of meaning. He insists upon the importance of the reader's necessary activity in the production of literature, but still maintains that the basic structure of a work does exist separately from the reader. The emphasis of criticism has evolved from an emphasis on product to process, but the process still points to the discovery of meaning.

The reader-response critics take this movement from product to process one step further than Barthes. Although different critics in the field vary widely on their inter-

¹⁹Barthes, p. 79.

pretations of the reading process, they all agree that the reader, not the author, the text, or the structure makes "meaning" in literature.²⁰

Robert Crossman argues that the literary paradigm has social implications. Crossman, a prominent reader-response critic, has suggested in his essay, "Do Reader's Make Meaning" the revolutionary significance of reader-response to the literary community. Crossman maintains that reader-response criticism is a revolution against the heirarchical standards of critical theory upheld by schools like the New Critics. Because it changes the center of the class from instructor to reader and focuses on process (reading) rather than product (text) it destroys the previously elitist literary community based on rank, prestige, and reputation. The belief that there exists one correct meaning does not support "the easy equality of friends, but the heirarchical structure of students, teachers, departments of literature, of less and more prestigious universities, journals, critical reputations."²¹

Thus, the process Kuhn describes from paradigm to anomaly and to the development of a new paradigm is easily

²⁰Meaning is in quotation marks because the definition of the word differs from that which it is normally, varying from critic to critic even in this school.

²¹Crossman, p. 160.

observed in the literary community of the late 1960's and early '70's. Hirsch, demanding an even more structured, dogmatic view of literature than the New Critics, published Validity In Interpretation in 1967. In 1969, Norman Rabkin edited a book of essays on Elizabethan Drama which focuses on the effect on the audience as an interpretive tool.²²

In 1970, Stanley Fish, one of the most prominent and radical reader-response critics, published his essay "Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics." And in 1971 Roland Barthes published the article mentioned previously. Literary interpretation, meaning, and the source of meaning, are thus seen as the grounds for a critical war fought with essays and books; the authors reacted to each other defensively and aggressively.²³

Reader-response criticism is an extremely important step for literary study. It pulls the artificial rug of objective, "valid interpretations" (recall Hirsch) right out from under elitist members of the literary society. Meaning is not to be found in what these members know about the

²²Reinterpretations of Elizabethan Drama, ed. Norman Rabkin, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969).

²³It is also interesting to note that James Moffett, one of the new writing theorists I will be discussing later, wrote Teaching The Universe Of Discourse in 1968. He, too, is reacting against the principles Hirsch asserts.

author or the circumstances of the production of text, but in the reader's experience of that text. Furthermore, meaning cannot be fixed or solid, but is always altering. Reading has always been said to be an imaginative experience. Parents often wish their children would read more because they want them to actively take part in the creation of the experience inspired by reading rather than simply being "fed" an experience the way most television does. Reader-response theorists (especially Wolfgang Iser) take this traditional view of reading and elaborate on it, showing precisely how this process takes place.

This move toward a more subjective view of literature is important because it removes the need to make the study of literature into a semi-scientific pursuit. Literature is written by human beings, about or in reaction to life, for human beings; and to attempt to convert any part of this process into a scientific solution can only detrimentally limit the work's and the reader's possibilities. The approach reader-response critics take to literature opens many doors for the understanding of the text, and more importantly, expands the knowledge of the whole

process of written communication.²⁴

Classified with reader-response critics such as Fish, Iser, and Crossman can be found a critic like Norman H. Holland. He represents the ever-present extreme of a good theory. Holland believes that since the interpretation of a work exists totally in the mind of the reader, any interpretation, no matter how bizarre or self-indulgent, is as correct as another. Criticism, for Holland, means simply reporting what the reader feels, recalls, or relates to in the course of reading a work. It is a criticism based on "I feel," and "I think" (as can readily be seen in Holland's essay "Re-Covering The Purloined Letter: Reading

²⁴The tenets behind reader-response criticism had their beginnings long before the 1960's. In his essay, "The Critic As Artist," Oscar Wilde sets forth many of the same assumptions as do the reader-response critics. Wilde asserts that without literary criticism, artistic creation does not exist. The role of the writer, in Wilde's view is a combination of the artistic and imaginative, and self-consciousness which is equivalent to the critical spirit. So Wilde, as do his descendants, insists upon the inter-relationship between writing and reading. Northrop Frye, too, has some similar notions about the process of reading. He sees the reader as recreator of the text. For Frye, the

arts form an extension of our own past, but find their meaning for us in our present situation. That present situation contains elements of vision which we project on the future, and those elements form the recreating aspect of our reading. (Creation and Recreation, p. 7.)

as a Personal Transaction.")²⁵ Were this the extent of reader-response critical theory, this paper could never have been written. Fortunately, it is not. Iser, Crossman, and Fish have created theories which allow for both the contributions of the reader and for those of the author to be considered when interpreting a text.

Wolfgang Iser, one of the most prominent reader-response critics, differs from other reader-response critics by approaching the critical process from a phenomenological point of view. It is the complex convergence of text and reader which creates the literary work. In his essay, "The Reading Process," from The Implied Reader, Iser concentrates on the psychological effects of reading a text and the resulting creation of the literary work. Literature acts as a mirror for the reader, reflecting back his or her own disposition, while simultaneously changing that image by pulling the reader out of "reality" and forcing him or her to experience an alien reality. Literature creates this effect by pulling the reader back and forth between expectation and negation.

The efficacy of a literary text is brought about by the apparent evocation and subsequent negation

²⁵Norman Holland, "Re-Covering The Purloined Letter: Reading as a Personal Transaction," in The Reader in the Text, ed. Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

of the familiar. What at first seemed to be an affirmation of our assumptions leads to our own rejection of them, thus tending to prepare us for a reorientation. And it is only when we have outstripped our preconceptions and left the shelter of the familiar that we are in a position to gather new experiences. As the literary text involves the reader in the formation of the means whereby the illusion is punctured, reading reflects the process by which we gain experience. Once the reader is entangled, his own preconceptions are continually over-taken, so that the text becomes his "present" while his own ideas fade into the "past"; as soon as this happens he is open to the immediate experience of the text, which was impossible so long as his preconceptions were his "present."²⁶

In a later essay based on his book The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response, Iser attempts to describe and account for the mental process of reading with particular emphasis on "blanks" or "gaps." Iser begins his discussion by citing the work of R. D. Laing on dyadic interaction and his theory on the "gaps" in interpersonal perception. Iser maintains that "asymmetry and the 'nothing' (basis of interpersonal relations which states that no one can experience another person's experience) are all different forms of an indeterminate, constitutive blank,

²⁶Wolfgang Iser, "The Reading Process," in Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism, ed. Jane P. Tompkins, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1980), p. 64.

which underlies all processes of interaction."²⁷ These blanks account for the variations in the view of the text which are attributable to the variations in the activity of selection and organization performed by the reader to fill in the blanks. The text, in other words, draws the reader, through well-placed blanks, to fill in those blanks with imaginative implications, thus producing the work through the interaction between reader and text.

Communication in literature, then, is a process set in motion and regulated, not by a given code, but by a mutually restrictive and magnifying interaction between the explicit and the implicit, between revelation and concealment. What is concealed spurs the reader into action, but this action is also controlled by what is revealed; the explicit in its turn is transformed when the implicit has been brought to light.²⁸

Stanley Fish is one of the most controversial reader-response critics. Fish and Iser constantly refute each other's work in literary journals, but despite their apparent differences, they have much in common.²⁹ Both

²⁷Wolfgang Iser, "Interaction Between Text and Reader," in The Reader In the Text, ed. Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 109.

²⁸Iser, "Interaction," p. 111.

²⁹Stanley Fish, "Why No One's Afraid of Wolfgang Iser," Diacritics, 11 (Spring 1981) 6.

Fish and Iser discuss the process of expectation and negation in relation to what a sentence does as opposed to what it means. Fish argues with Iser's concept of the text guiding the reader through literary patterns, but this is essentially what Fish assumes when he discusses the influence of the interpretive community. The major difference is that Iser feels these literary patterns are in the text (placed there by the author purposefully), while Fish feels that the reader creates these patterns in the text. These two ideas, however, are not conflicting if one looks at the writing-reading process as a whole. If both the writer and the reader are influenced by the interpretive community (to which they both necessarily belong), then both will be familiar with the same patterns and communication will occur through a combination of the writer's intention (exhibited through the literary traditions) and the reader's realization (also attained through the literary traditions).³⁰ Although Fish asserts that the reader, and only the reader, makes meaning, he admits to some force outside the reader (those conventions developed within the interpretive community) which strongly influences the reader's conception.

³⁰ Johnathan Culler, "Prolegomena to a Theory of Reading," in The Reader in the Text, ed. Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

Iser says almost the same thing, but maintains that this guiding force is in the text, having been placed there by the author who is also a member of that community. Their differences, however, are less important to this essay than their similarities, so I shall leave it to them to argue with each other, while I simply point out their major similarities and show how they are relevant to the teaching of composition.

Fish's concept of critical analysis, is simply the rigorous and disinterested asking of the question, what does this word, phrase, sentence, paragraph, chapter, novel, play, poem, do?; and the execution involves an analysis of the developing responses of the reader in relation to the words as they succeed one another in time.³¹

Fish, in other words, emphasizes the temporal flow of the reading process instead of an after-the-fact analysis of the

³¹Fish, "Literature," p. 73.

It is interesting to note the similarity between what Fish says in this quote and what Stephen Booth says in his essay "On the Value of Hamlet" in Reinterpretations of Elizabethan Drama (previously cited). See note 7.

It is reasonable to talk about what the play does do, and to test the suggestion that in a valued play what it does do is what we value." (p. 139).

Booth was in Berkeley at the same time as Fish and the two essays quoted were written in 1969 (Booth) and 1970 (Fish). Thus we can see that the reader-response method was not an isolated event.

entire utterance. This changes the focus of literary criticism from the product (where value placed on the meaning results from having read the work) to the process of the experience itself. Meaning does not come from the denotation of a word, or a work, but rather the effect of the work which is the "meaning experience"³² and the driving force on the reader.

For Fish, meaning, then instead of being inherent in the word, is dependent on the activity in relation to which it could be thought to be meaningful. Normative meanings are not embedded in the language itself, but rather are functions of the interpretive communities. Thus, the assignment of significance is not a conscious or relative process. It occurs as soon as the work is placed in a situation and language cannot exist outside of a situation. "The problem of how meaning is determined is only a problem if there is a point at which its determination has not been made, and . . . there is no such point."³³ The lack of context, such as Hirsch attempts to use in his readability theory, is a context itself.

Fish's concept of the interpretive community and the

³²Fish, "Literature," p. 76.

³³Stanley Fish, Is There a Text In This Class?, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 310.

determination of meaning is also pertinent to writing instruction. If the interpretive community designates the literary patterns which the reader sees the text through, then the writer who wishes to communicate a particular message to the reader would benefit by knowing these same patterns. Although Fish maintains that the author's intention is, finally, unimportant, I feel that if the writer uses these conventions in the work, they would tend to key the desired response from the reader. (This idea is much closer to Iser's form of reader-response than Fish's, but Fish's idea of the interpretive community lends itself to such a method.)

This total concentration on the experience of a literary work expands critical horizons. Where other forms of criticism have had major difficulties explaining the significance of many modern "nonsense" works, reader-response opens welcoming arms to them.

In an experiential analysis, the sharp distinction between sense and nonsense, with the attendant value judgments and the talk about truth content, is blurred, because the place where sense is made or not is the reader's mind rather

than the printed page or the space between the covers of a book.³⁴

The need for a critical theory such as reader-response can be easily seen here. As has been previously stated, the development of a new paradigm often comes when anomalies (like nonsense works) disrupt the conventional ones.

Fish maintains the same basis for his arguments when he applies them more specifically to the study of other kinds of literature. In his essay, "Demonstration vs. Persuasion," Fish states that the demonstration model of literary criticism is wrong because it is based on the fallacy that "literature is a monolith and that there is a single set of operations by which its characteristics are discovered and evaluated."³⁵ Contrary to this assertion, Fish believes that it is not formal characteristics inherent in the work, but the reader's search for particular characteristics which result in the emergence of those

³⁴Fish, "Literature," p. 31.

Iser's version of reader-response would also allow for "nonsense" works. The inability to make "sense" of a work in the way that one normally makes sense would cause the reader to abandon his or her preconceptions of how "sense" is normally produced and "open (him or herself) to the immediate experience" of the otherwise nonsensical work. Since the only meaning to be found in nonsense works is the experience of the words themselves, this approach would work ideally.

³⁵Fish, Is There?, p. 358.

qualities. Skilled reading, then, is "not a matter of discovering what is there, but rather of knowing how to produce what can thereafter be said to be there."³⁶ The interpretive strategies Fish calls upon the reader to inflict (because it is not actually in the work, but is in the reader's mind) upon the work are, in turn, forced upon the reader by the present interpretive community and are also necessarily used by the author during the writing process, because he or she, too, is a member of the same interpretive community. Thus, these interpretive strategies are social, conventional, and circumscribe the entire literary process from writing to reading. It is these accepted interpretive strategies which deter the informed reader³⁷ from applying idiosyncratic interpretations to literary works. Again, these interpretive strategies do change (according to the development of the literary paradigm) usually as a reaction to, or in opposition to the conventional ones.

Reader-response criticism, then, may be seen as the most recent stage in the development of the literary paradigm. It is a move from the structured, text-centered,

³⁶ Fish, Is There?, p. 329

³⁷ The "informed reader" is a reader who is familiar with the interpretive strategies accepted by the interpretive community.

authority-centered, critical theories of the past, to a flexible, process-centered, reader-oriented theory for today. Reader-response criticism does not, however, necessarily lead to the critical chaos feared by many of the more traditional schools. It simply acknowledges the important status of the reader in the critical process as the creator of his or her own meaning. The activity of reading as creating and that of writing as creating become, if not one, at least more directly related in reader-response theory.

READER-RESPONSE CRITICISM AND THE WRITER

Reader-response criticism's shift in focus from the author as ultimate master of his art to the reader as actual creator seemingly leaves little for the author to accomplish, but this is not so. Reader-response critics see the role of the author as vital in the signifying process; however, the writer is no longer accorded the sovereign right of pronouncing the "actual meaning" once enjoyed (or perhaps despised) by earlier schools of literary thought. The author's relation to the reader ranges, according to the particular critic, from learned manipulator to fellow pursuer of meaning.

Robert Crossman sees the significance of the author in political terms. He sees the traditional view of the author as being conducive to a dictatorial, rigid, societal structure because it insinuates that there is only one true meaning and that the author knows precisely what he or she not only intended to say, but said. This theory, maintains Crossman, eliminates the possibility of multiple interpretations, and peer discussion because it sets up a system in which there are "right" and "wrong" interpretations. Crossman prefers to recognize a literary society based on equality of opinion. This does not refute the statement, "Authors make meaning"; it simply maintains that authors make meaning through the same process, and on the same level

as readers.

Do authors make meaning? Yes, of course they do, in exactly the same way that we all make meaning: as interpreters, as readers. Because we have all been taught to believe in Imperial Truth we have imagined the process of writing as antithetical to the process of reading: the writer in contact with the wordless realm of Truth, somehow embodies his ineffable vision of reality in words and sends it to the reader, who (if all goes well) removes the "meaning" from its verbal envelope. I suggest that this accords badly with our own experience as writers.... The very act of writing includes reading.³⁸

One can easily see the vast difference in the perception of what writing is between Crossman and the New Critics discussed earlier. While Brooks and Warren see writing as simply a means to an end, Crossman sees it as an involved, explorative process which develops the piece as it is being written. Many of the new writing theorists (especially Donald M. Murray) see writing as Crossman does. Thus, the focus of the writing class changes from simply the recording of a pre-structured set of ideas to the process of working out those ideas on paper. The implications of this view of writing may be seen in the explanation of Donald M. Murray's writing theory later in this essay.

Wolfgang Iser sees the author's role in more traditional terms, but with an emphasis on the writer's attempt

³⁸Crossman, p. 163.

to acknowledge and influence the reader's role in the process of interpretation. The author, for Iser, differs from the "author-king" in that he or she cannot simply record information on paper and hope that the reader understands. Rather through the extensive and careful use of "familiar literary patterns and recurrent literary themes, together with allusions to familiar social and historical contexts. . . and techniques or strategies used to set the familiar against the unfamiliar,"³⁹ the writer conveys an experience to the reader, and more importantly, stimulates attitudes toward that experience.

Iser does not agree with Crossman's belief that the writing and the reading process are one and the same. Instead, Iser sees the two activities at opposite ends of a pole, although both exist within the work. Iser also disagrees with the New Critics who maintain that the reading process is external to the fact of the work itself. Iser claims that there are two poles within the text: the artistic pole, which is the author's intention, and the aesthetic pole, which is the reader's realization of the virtual position of the work. The author's purpose is to put the reader through a series of experiences (recall Iser's explanation of expectation and negation previously

³⁹Iser, "Reading," p. 65.

cited) which will enable him or her to identify with what is being read. In turn, this identification will allow the author to stimulate certain attitudes in the reader which, according to Iser, is the final aim of literature. The writer, then, serves as a guide, using the tools of narrative technique to activate the reader's imagination into experiencing the work and, thereby, assuming certain attitudes. The literary text is "an arena in which reader and author participate in a game of the imagination,"⁴⁰ but the writer consciously organizes the plays.

Stanley Fish does not deal much with the role of the author because his interpretation of reader-response criticism places all making of meaning in the mind of the reader. He does, however, state that his literature students, after approaching works from his method, "become incapable of writing uncontrolled prose, since so much of their time is spent discovering how much the prose of other writers controls them, and in how many ways."⁴¹ He does, then, insinuate that the writer of a piece of art uses the literary devices available to manipulate the reader, and since his manner of criticism emphasizes the rhetorical effect of the prose on the audience, one would expect a writer to use

⁴⁰Iser, "Reading," p. 51.

⁴¹Fish, "Literature," p. 99.

literary strategies specifically to produce these effects. In his essay, "Demonstration vs. Persuasion," Fish discusses criticism as a persuasive art. He tells writers to establish a point of view consistent with the anticipated point of view of the audience and work from there (elsewhere he states that this is a necessary method in all patterns of communication). In light of this advice, and in accordance with his critical theory, one would have to assume that Fish feels that writing is a controlled, manipulative process. When viewed, however, from the reader's stance, Fish believes that the author's attempts at control are unimportant, because the reader determines meaning. This, however, as previously stated, seems to contradict Fish's concept of the interpretive community. I believe that, even in Fish's theory, the author does manipulate the reader by using what he or she has learned from the interpretive community. If both the reader and writer are familiar with interpretive strategies or are permitted to create their own interpretive community in the classroom, they will accept a common set of language situations and

will necessarily respond in like manner.⁴²

⁴²In the classroom situation here proposed the text (containing an assortment of essays) would, in the beginning, serve as the focus of the class. While interpreting the essays in class, the instructor would constantly refer the students back to what the text does to the reader. This discussion would soon center around how the writer produces these affects on the reader. What does the author do to affect the reader? Soon the audience will have gathered a common set of literary conventions. Whether or not the author consciously used these devices is unimportant; the readers perceive them to be in the text and to have affected them. Thus, when the students-readers-writers begin to write, they will be more audience oriented. They will consider the affect they desire to produce on the audience, think back to being affected in such manner themselves, recall what particular technique the author used to induce such an affect, and use it themselves. This is, obviously, a theoretical account of the process.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE WRITING PARADIGM

The development of the literary paradigm represented in reader-response criticism is simultaneously mirrored in the theories behind the teaching of writing. As literary anomalies were perceived in New Criticism, so they are being perceived in a "New Critical" mode of composition instruction. A supposed correlation between knowledge of formal grammar and the ability to write well has been proven to be weak; social implications about "standard formal written English" have been brought to the attention of the literary community; the psychological effects of too much negative criticism on student papers has been proven to be bad; and ultimately, there is the crisis in literacy, which is now being so frequently attested to by institutions of learning throughout the country. All of these problems indicate the need for a new paradigm in the teaching of writing.

The twentieth century has seen many shifts in the theories behind the teaching of composition.⁴³ In the early 1900's rote learning of grammatical rules and a strong emphasis on the style of the handwriting as opposed to the style of the piece prevailed. In the 1910's the

⁴³Sanford Radner, Fifty Years of English Teaching: A Historical Analysis of the Presidential Addresses of NCTE, (Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 1960).

focus changed to a more analytical approach: questions like "What is a sentence? What is 'correct' spelling? What is grammar?" were asked. The academic community, not asking whether these mechanical aspects of writing were relevant, were attempting to confine language and its use to a scientific mold. Precision and doctrine were the aims of English intellectuals.

The mid-1930's produced a new look at language from the psychological point of view. Questions were asked concerning what aids and retards student progress in writing. A call for research to discover concrete methods to enable students to write better and faster was made. However, with the advent of World War II, the recognition of the uses of propaganda, and the resulting realization of the power of words, an emphasis on semantics was renewed. Fear of the destruction of language through use of slang, colloquialisms, and violations of mechanical rules produced emphasis on these areas. Semantics, joined by linguistics, created a scientific confidence for the literary community through approximately 1955. In 1955, research in the field indicated that writing was best improved not by the memorization of grammatical rules, but through "disciplined practice in writing."⁴⁴ For the past twenty-five years, English

⁴⁴Radner, p. 6.

teachers have been trying to discover what exactly "disciplined practice in writing" means. More recent studies will be examined in detail later in this essay.

The culmination of the first fifty-eight years of the twentieth century was a rigid emphasis on clarity and correctness in writing. Objective analysis of precisely what correct writing entailed was sought. Thus, specific rules exploring what sentences, paragraphs, and papers were, abounded. Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren present an example of this type of composition instruction in their book Modern Rhetoric.⁴⁵ They see writing as

a way of training the mind in logical thought. For one thing, in writing we must understand the structure of language, what the parts of speech do, how the words relate to one another, what individual words mean, the rules of grammar and punctuation.⁴⁶

Along with this, Brooks and Warren advocate the use of a college reader in order to teach the student-writer to break down and define the structure of the discourse. The basic questions they ask the student-reader (and prospective writer) to consider are channeled toward viewing the literature as a product and concentrating on stylistic aspects of the work such as theme, tone, organization, form of

⁴⁵Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, Modern Rhetoric, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1958).

⁴⁶Brooks, Modern, p. 7.

discourse, and specific use of language.⁴⁷

My basic argument, however, is not with the theoretical application of Brooks' and Warren's method. This theory has obviously produced many competent writers, but it has also lead to a way of teaching composition that I have seen not work. In recent years, the ideas behind Brooks' and Warren's composition theory have produced instructors who endlessly lecture on grammar rules, use the text as an example of what "good" writers do by concentrating on the style as opposed to the effect of the writing, focus on writing as simply the physical act of placing on paper what should already be "clear and concise" in the student's mind, and see errors as cause for punish-

⁴⁷The questions used in this approach appear as follows:

1. What is the material?
2. What understanding do I already have of such material? That is, do I have any basis for comparison and criticism?
3. What is the author's motive? Is he trying to inform me, convince me, persuade me, or make me participate in an imaginative experience--the experience of a novel, say or of a poem or play?
4. What is the author's basic idea or theme?
5. How is this idea developed in the organization of the work? In other words, what is the author's method of thinking?
6. What are the tone and style of the work? Do I understand the intention and the effect of the language as used in the work?
7. What enlightenment does the work give me? New facts? New ideas? New methods of thought? New sense of character? Deeper awareness of human experience?

ment. Surely many people learning to write in the 1960's and 70's recall grading procedures based on the number of fragments, misspellings, and other mechanical errors in their papers. This method turns the writing process into a juggling act in which student-writers attempt to understand and use all the prescriptive rules they have been abstractly told about; it causes confusion and writer's block in many students because they are afraid of forgetting or misusing one of the many rules they have been taught to concentrate on. This leads students away from the exciting, exploratory aspect of writing that must occur for student-writers to learn to write well.⁴⁸

The changes now occurring in the theories concerning composition parallel those occurring in literary critical theory. Composition teachers are moving away from the rigid, standardized, instructor-centered, product-centered methods of teaching writing to more flexible, student-centered, process-oriented methods. The days of the prescriptive writing workbook which instructs students to produce paragraphs including a topic sentence, two or more supporting sentences, and "extenders" are, thankfully, coming to an end. Writing instructors are losing interest

⁴⁸Note E. D. Hirsch's approach to composing in The Philosophy of Composition, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977.)

in the forms of correct writing and focusing on how good writing is actually performed. These new approaches, like reader-response criticism, involve a more interdisciplinary study of the activity of writing; the psychological and behavioral bases of writing are being taken into account.

James Moffett presents some of these new approaches to the teaching of writing in his book, Teaching the Universe of Discourse. Moffett is concerned, not with what the students produce, but with how they learn to discourse. He disagrees with the traditional method which involves the students in in-depth analysis of writing techniques and patterns because he believes that "the most natural assumption about teaching any symbol system should be that the student employ his time using that system in every realistic way that it can be used, not that he analyze it or study it as an object."⁴⁹ Moffett, then, does teach the literary tools at their disposal, but not through lectures; he uses what they write to show them what they've done instead of prescribing what they ought to do. Moffett sees the teacher's reliance on analysis "turning out students who know all the correct jargon and can talk about writing endlessly, but who do not write well and are not truly

⁴⁹Moffett, p. 7.

sensitive to style, rhetoric, and logic."⁵⁰

Moffett's complaint is very much like reader-response critic's reaction to New Critics. Like Moffett, reader-response critics feel that analysis of an end product (after reading the entire text) is useless and that the only way to study literature is to experience it and study that experience. Both fields, then, emphasize the importance of "doing" as opposed to analyzing.

Moffett's renouncing of the prescriptive method of teaching writing logically leads to a refusal to use textbooks. Moffett maintains that textbooks make writing more difficult because they give the students rules and advice on how to write; the writers, then, concern themselves with interpreting and using those rules along with attempting to fulfill the actual assignment instead of just focusing on exactly what the topic calls for. This leads the students away from the process of writing by occupying them with a set of rules which they have not yet been able to apply to their own work. Teaching grammar, in the traditional mode, also causes this type of problem. Moffett asserts that students need an awareness of what they actually do when they write, not rules. What Fish claims for his theory of criticism applies just as well to

⁵⁰Moffett, p. 7.

Moffett's theory of writing instruction.

More than any other way of teaching I know, it breaks down the barriers between students and the knowledge they must acquire, first by identifying that knowledge with something that they themselves are already doing, and then by asking them to become self-conscious about what they do in the hope that they can learn to do it better.⁵¹

Most students in composition courses are able to communicate in writing (something they already do). The hope of the writing instructor is to make them more aware of how they do this, and how they can improve on what they already do, making them better writers.

Strongly opposed to the writing instruction previously discussed which emphasized the production of correct writing, Moffett encourages students to make errors. If a student attempts to communicate in writing and fails, it is at that point that they will be interested in the "right" way to do it. The rule will no longer be an abstract, unclear, irrelevant demand, but rather it will be a helpful tool towards verbal expression. Therefore, Moffett believes that error necessarily precedes good writing.

As with reader-response criticism and the literary community, one of the most significant breaks from tradi-

⁵¹Fish, Is There?, p. 122.

tional teaching methods is the move away from the instructor-centered class. In many cases this happens simply due to the emphasis on process, but Moffett takes it further. Feedback on student papers is, according to Moffett, one of the most important parts of teaching writing. Instructor comments need to be real reactions to the work, not professional or impertinent scribbles in the margins. Peer response, however, is even better because the students react to each other in a more honest, personal way and this approach widens the range of the audience for the writer.

Learning to use language, then, requires the particular feedback of human response, because it is to other people that we direct speech. The fact that one writes by oneself does not at all diminish the need for response, since one writes for others. Even when one purports to be writing for oneself--for pure self-expression, if there is such a thing--one cannot escape the ultimately social implications inherent in any use of language. . . . The desire to get certain effects on an audience is what motivates the use of speech. This is what rhetoric is all about.⁵²

Moffett's emphasis on audience response changes the role of the instructor from authoritarian to simply responder; and one of the most important skills he teaches his students is not how to write, but how to respond to each other's, and, by connection, their own work.

⁵²Moffett, p. 191.

It is this aspect of the new writing theories that so clearly calls to mind the relevance of reader-response criticism. In Moffett's composition class, he wishes to teach his students to respond to each other's work. In other words, he wishes to create a mini-interpretive community in the classroom. To teach students to react to literature in the same way as they react to each other's papers would expand their view of possible literary devices (not prescribed, but in response to what they discover in the work) and better enable them to utilize these techniques in their own work. Because they will experience these patterns rather than simply be told about them, I think they will understand the effect the patterns have on the reader and use them accordingly.

Roger H. Garrison, another of the new writing theorists, has created one of the most innovative of the new instructional methods for the teaching of composition. Not only does he strongly repudiate the traditional teacher-oriented, product-centered class, but he also refutes the traditional group situation of a classroom. Garrison's method is a highly individualized, flexible approach to writing instruction which uses a tutorial method for learning.

Garrison asserts that traditional methods of teaching writing are extremely inefficient, and judging by

the poor writing skills of the average college graduate, they are also ineffective. Because most class sessions are spent discussing writing,

students may be learning (a) how others have written, (b) what techniques have (apparently) been used by professionals to achieve certain effects, (c) what grammatical errors to avoid, (d) how to respond to the questions at the end of each segment of a "College Reader,"⁵³ and (e) not least, how to write for the demands, quirks, prejudices, and tastes of a particular instructor (how to pass the course). But busy as all this may keep a freshman it will be largely irrelevant to the business of learning to write.⁵⁴

Garrison, like Moffett, believes that the scientific way of thinking about writing (correct and incorrect) is irrelevant. Garrison defines a writer as any "person who successfully communicates thoughts, information, ideas, feelings, or any material from experience, in writing to others."⁵⁵ Writing instruction, then should concentrate not on prescribed forms, rules, or correctness, but on the act of writing and how a writer works. Learning to write

⁵³Garrison's objection is to the questions posed by New Critics (product-oriented) and is not, therefore, in direct contradiction to my suggestion to use reader-response.

⁵⁴Roger H. Garrison, "One-to-One: Tutorial Instruction in Freshman Composition," *New Directions for Community Colleges*, Vol. II, No I (Spring, 1974), p. 56.

⁵⁵Garrison, p. 58.

is a process of discovery as opposed to the acceptance of instruction. Thus, we see Garrison's method as one depending on self-instruction. The role of the instructor is that of a guide, giving the student suggestions as to the weaknesses and strengths in his or her papers, and allowing the student enough freedom to find these qualities him or herself. The premise behind Garrison's method is,

the complexity of learning is precisely the complexity of the individual in relation to his experience. To learn is to be creatively active in the presence of the thing to be learned. No one can manage this activity for another: it must be self-motivated and self-managed. It can, however, be guided.⁵⁶

As with Moffett, Garrison's focus on the importance of actually performing the activity which the students are trying to learn as opposed to analyzing it is parallel to the focus of reader-response criticism on the importance of the experience of reading the text.

The practical result of such theories is a class in which students write constantly. No lectures and very few class discussions occur (writing problems are individual, not collective). The instructor discusses individually with each student, during the writing process, what needs to be worked on and what is well-done. Feedback, then, comes while the writer is working instead of one or two

⁵⁶Garrison, p. 58.

weeks after the project has been forgotten. Punitive measures, such as grades and written comments are kept to a minimum, and are based on progress rather than what the student doesn't know.

Donald M. Murray, in his essay, "Writing as Process: How Writing Finds Its Own Meaning," discusses writing in much the same way as the reader-response critics. He sees the composing process as "a significant kind of thinking in which the symbols of language assume a purpose of their own and instruct the writer during the composing process."⁵⁷ Murray claims that while writing, not before, meaning is made through a series of almost simultaneous interactions,⁵⁸ but that in the teaching situation, these interactions must be broken down into three basic stages: rehearsing, drafting, and revising. The first two stages are very similar to the commonly known steps of prewriting and writing. The third, however, has a different twist to it that reader-response critics, in particular, would agree with.

The final stage in the writing process is revising. The writing stands apart from the writer, and the

⁵⁷Murray, p. 3.

⁵⁸Note the similarity between this and Iser's description of the experience of the text in the "Interaction Between Text and Reader."

writer interacts with it, first to find out what the writing has to say, and then to help the writing say it clearly and gracefully. The writer moves from a broad survey of the text to line-by-line editing, all the time developing, cutting, and reordering. During this part of the process the writer must try not to force the writing to what the writer hopes the text would say, but instead try to help the writing say what it intends to say.⁵⁹

As with Moffett and Garrison, Murray does not believe in prescriptive teaching through grammar, form, or rhetoric. He feels that this approach to writing is harmful because it gives the student the false impression that writers know the form and content of their work before they write. Murray also asserts that the only way a teaching method can be proven to be effective is if the students write better when they're through, not by whether or not they can recite rules and forms of writing.

Murray differs from Garrison in that he feels that the classroom should be a workshop, not a one-on-one experience. Although individual conferences are important, Murray feels that the teacher's role should be that of a peer writer and that the class, as a whole, should comment on each other's drafts as a community. "The teacher should not look at the text for the student, not even with the student. The teacher looks at--and listens to--the student

⁵⁹Murray, p. 5.

watching the text evolve."⁶⁰ In doing this, Murray creates Fish's "interpretive community" in the classroom. Peer writers and the instructor writer all become equal voices in the process of discovering what makes a good paper and what does not. Robert Crossman would, no doubt, find this method of composition instruction attractive because it is based on an egalitarian class, much as reader-response is in the world of literary criticism.

Moffett's, Garrison's and Murray's methods are a small selection of a wide variety of instructional techniques currently used in writing classes. Others are based on experiential models; prose models used in a process-oriented way; the rhetorical approach; the epistemic approach, and an interdisciplinary model. There is also a large theoretical school which deals with specifically basic or remedial writers. However, most of the new approaches to composition instruction, no matter what level, concentrate on the primacy of the student, the uselessness of a textbook, the process of writing, and the importance of good, as opposed to correct, writing.

Those who object to the new writing paradigm tend to base their criticism on the lack of standardization asked for in student writing. As may be seen from the

⁶⁰Murray, p. 17.

three methods previously cited, there is no focus on form, grammar or spelling. The critics, upholding traditional "standard formal written English," believe that the new approaches are contributing to the destruction of writing. Mechanics and form have, they maintain, a necessary place in the classroom and they need to be given to the student in the prescriptive forms of lectures, rule-books, and workbooks. This group of instructional theorists represent the "Back-to-Basics" model of teaching. They assert that in order to write well, students must first know the basic rules of writing. The actual composition of an essay is seen as the product of learning the basic rules and forms, and the proper use of basics is used as the guide to writing assessment.

It is this section of the writing instructors community that writing tests serve. Examinations used to discover whether or not a student can write by looking at a single essay, written in no more than two hours, with no previous instruction, and on a necessarily superficial, irrelevant (to the student's writing needs) topic, are completely contrary to the tenets of the new writing paradigm. These tests are product-oriented and, especially the current high-school proficiency exams, concentrate heavily on correct form (the five-paragraph essay and grammar). Grading techniques such as holistic scoring

have been used in order to move away from the strict doctrine of correctness previously used, but the emphasis on product cannot be altered in a test situation. These tests may be an accurate appraisal of the ability to communicate through the written word under a stressful situation, but they are not a worthy appraisal of a student's understanding of the writing process.

The new instructional theorists answer these objections by simply pointing to the results of such methods. The increasing lack of writing ability students have exhibited in the last twenty years is evidence that traditional methods are highly ineffective. In the past, instructors asserted that it was not the inefficiency of the method, but the ineducability of the new breed of student which caused the decline in student writing. The new theorists, however, disagree. Donald M. Murray maintains that "we must show that our students are able to write more effectively and produce pieces of writing that find their own meaning because they understand what happens during the writing act."⁶¹ Since the new writing paradigm is just now gaining popularity with composition instructors, we will have to wait for the results.

⁶¹Murray, p. 13.

CONCLUSION

It may be seen, then, that the parallels between reader-response criticism and the new writing paradigm should not be ignored. The developmental process (what kinds of theories both schools were reacting against), the premises on which the theories are based (process-oriented, student-oriented), the pedagogical approaches, (based on the active participation of the student in both areas), and the primary aims of both theories are too similar not to be considered important. Literary criticism and the study of the writing process both explore the process of communication through the written word. Both study the effects and the possibility of affecting the audience with literary patterns which find existence in the literary community. Both, in other words, study the experience of language.

The new writing theorists refute the use of reading as a way of learning to write because of the manner in which such readings were used in the traditional approach. Students were told to read essays written by professional writers in order to see an example of the forms they were supposed to imitate. The essays were approached as a finished product, containing correct form, grammar, spelling, etc., which the students were requested to reproduce. The questions which the students used to analyze the literature

were based on seeing writing as a finished product (recall Brooks and Warren). Reader-response criticism, however, approaches literature from a process point of view. In using the reader-response approach to the text,⁶² the student-reader assumes the role of the teacher-reader of his or her own work. The student experiences the work, focusing on what it does rather than what it means which is precisely how a composition instructor needs to look at student writing. Meaning should be a secondary concern for the teacher of writing. The primary concern is what the writing succeeds or fails to do; and it is the discovery of how writers (whether peer or professional writers) produce these effects which should be the purpose of reading materials in a composition class. By experiencing the effect of another writer's work, the students will become familiar with the literary patterns and, one hopes, learn to use them in their own work. The scope of this process would be something like this; the student-reader experiences the work of a professional writer, studying what effects the prose produces and then, after, not before this experience, analyzes what exactly caused this effect, whether it be

⁶²The literary works used in this approach would be discussed in a reader-response manner. Therefore, no single set of questions would apply to more than one piece. The only general question would be "What does this do?"

literary patterns, semantics, structure, etc. The student-writer then attempts to write his or her own piece, not worrying about anything but fulfilling the required topic. While writing, the student-writer will also become the student-reader (asking the same questions of the prose as he or she did of the professional work) and respond to his or her own writing as would the teacher-reader. This procedure would enable the student-reader-writer to see the work from an audience point of view and alter it according to whether it accomplishes the desired intention or not (the desired intention may, however, have changed since the writing is in itself an exploration of that intention).

If student-writers are to achieve some level of writing proficiency through a process approach, it seems only logical that they need to see the process from all sides. Traditional methods of teaching composition attempted to do this by giving prescriptive advice and examples--both product-oriented techniques. By using reader-response criticism and concentrating on the writing and reading process, composition instructors will guide their students all the way through the experience of written language, leaving them with a fuller understanding of the entire communication process.

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